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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides a statement of the position of two collaborating associations on education appropriate for kindergarten children. Contents focus on: (1) aspects of children's growth and physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development; (2) ways in which young children learn; and (3) curriculum, including language arts, reading, mathematics, science, social studies, health, art, music, and physical education. The document also discusses class size, parent-teacher relationships, placement, enrollment, and the transition from preschool to kindergarten. References and related position statements are cited. Contributors to the paper are listed. (RH)

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KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

A POSITION STATEMENT

St. Louis Association for the Education of Young Children

and

Southwestern Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children

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GREATER ST. LOUIS KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION POSITION STATEMENT

The year young children spend in kindergarten is a unique year of transition from the informality of the preschool setting to the more formal setting of the elementary school. Misconceptions abound regarding the goals and objectives of the kindergarten year. As educators of young children, it is our responsibility to communicate to the public, to school administrators, and to parents our understanding of the components of a successful kindergarten program.

Kindergartens in the Greater St. Louis area have a distinguished tradition. St. Louis was the site of the first successful public school kindergarten in the United States. Although their curriculum may vary by region or according to private or public status; a core of commonality needs to be nurtured if our kindergartens are to have credibility and to continue the tradition. As more kindergarten programs expand to a full day, a statement of policy which clearly delineates the many facets of an appropriate curriculum will contribute excellence in kindergartens, regardless of setting.

Child Growth and Development

As educators of young children we believe that child growth and development principles serve as the foundation of education and provide the framework for teaching.

When children come to kindergarten, nothing is more obvious than their individual differences. They are about the same chronological age, but they are not the same in developmental age, in maturity, in physical characteristics, or in attitudes and aptitudes.

Johnny just turned five; Mary will be six in February.

Jimmy can do handstands; Billy is just happy to have two feet on the ground.

Sally wears a size seven dress; Jenny is a petite three.

David is fearful; Ruthie has few inhibitions.

Jimmy talks all the time; his twin brother says little.

To the teacher, these differences emphasize the importance of understanding child development and knowing the characteristics of four, five, and six year olds. This knowledge helps the teacher meet children's individual needs. In understanding the continuum of development, the following developmental overview may be helpful. It is well to remember that in the early childhood years, girls usually mature more rapidly than boys.

Physically, the kindergarten child:

- Is growing more slowly than in earlier years
- Has a tremendous drive for physical activity -- running, jumping, tumbling, pulling
- Is able to be quiet for short periods of time
- Enjoys games with plenty of movement
- Is more skillful at gross motor activities than fine motor activities
- Usually has developed a hand preference by the end of kindergarten
- Is susceptible to communicable diseases and the common cold, but is beginning to build immunity

Intellectually, the kindergarten child:

- Is active, eager, interested, and curious
- Learns by experiencing, observing, questioning, imitating, examining, exploring, and investigating
- Derives more satisfaction from the process than the product
- Has a growing attention span
- Is interested in stories and books; has some difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality
- Clarifies understanding of relationships through dramatic play, art, movement, and construction
- Can tell relatively long stories in sequence
- Advances from the scribble stage to realistic figures in drawing
- Is growing in ability to think, to conceptualize
- Solves own problems; sometimes needs adult guidance
- Likes to finish what is started, shows sense of order in working and putting away toys and materials
- Can continue play from one day to another

Emotionally and socially, the kindergarten child:

- Needs to experience own success daily
- Enjoys recognition of accomplishments
- Gauges success or failure in terms of what the adult seems to expect
- Needs a sense of belonging
- Responds to praise and consistent direction
- Thrives on trust, fairness, and achievable standards
- Finds security in definite routine; needs to live in a reasonably predictable world
- Is growing in emotional stability
- May begin to show rivalry
- Has a strong emotional link with the home
- May show fear of the new and unusual
- Is not always able to distinguish right from wrong by adult standards
- May cry or sulk if opposed
- Can understand rules and accepts the consequence of breaking them
- Has a constantly growing sense of humor; laughs at childlike jokes, silly words, unusual or unexpected sounds
- Is serious and businesslike in play activities
- Seeks companionship of other children; plays best in groups of two to seven
- Is protective toward playmates and siblings
- Chooses and changes friends frequently but as the year progresses likes to play with a constant friend
- Needs adult help in learning to share materials, take turns, and plan activities
- Has few adult prejudices
- Is willing and eager to assume responsibility within own maturity level
- Is self-centered but growing in unselfishness

How Young Children Learn

Young children learn through doing...

Children are active human beings. They learn best when they are totally involved and have space in which they can be active.

Young children learn through a concrete, hands-on, manipulative approach...

Through handling objects, children discover relations of their everyday world.

Young children learn through experiencing...

Through actual experiences such as a trip to the gas station or a visit to the zoo, children discover what their world is like.

Young children learn through their senses...

Through opportunities to touch, to taste, and to hear, and to see, children explore and understand the world.

Young children learn through play...

Through their play with blocks, manipulatives, dramatic play props, children make sense of their world.

Through their play, children can understand concepts and satisfy their innate curiosity.

Through their play, children take their first steps in the mental operation of symbolic thought.

Young children learn through their own talk and talk with other children...

Through language, children attend to aspects of their experience, reflect on them and express them in some way.

Play is the most complete of all educational processes. It is the children's way of learning, exploring, and understanding the world, as well as a source of pleasure. The kindergarten teacher plans and prepares the environment for play as carefully as any other area of the curriculum. Concepts are developed, along with a background of information, as a teacher plans activities which capitalize on children's innate curiosity and interests. In this environment of play, children begin to take their first steps in the mental operation of symbolic thought. They test new ideas, practice new skills, and begin to see relationships.

Curriculum

The kindergarten year is the foundation for later learning in primary years and beyond. Young children must begin to organize materials, assume responsibility for personal and school property, adjust to daily schedules and routines, respond appropriately to peers and adults, and learn to listen and follow directions. Acquisition of these skills prepares children for future satisfying school experiences.

The kindergarten curriculum is broad and rich, and introduces children to a wide range of concepts and skills while helping them gain insight into the world. The curriculum encourages children to explore, discover, and create. Children are challenged in areas of math, language, science, social studies, physical education, and creative arts. These subjects are integrated to form a unified curriculum so that the concepts taught are more functional and show a relationship to the *"whole"* of the child's world. The curriculum enables children to grow and learn in a carefully prepared environment. This environment is organized through learning centers that allow children to make decisions based on their needs and interests. Successful activities are built on children's past experiences and interests. Activities are informal and fun as opposed to a formal paper, pencil, and workbook approach; and are based on developmental principles which foster the growth of children as individuals.

While kindergarten curriculum must acknowledge developmental variability in children, it is organized around age appropriate objectives toward which all children are progressing. The range of objectives is broad enough to allow some children to attain higher levels of achievement than most and others to continue working toward mastery of certain objectives during the primary grades. Charting each child's progress toward clearly defined objectives enables teachers to communicate in specific terms with parents and subsequent teachers, as well as to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Language Arts-Reading

The goal of the language arts-reading curriculum is to build on children's existing knowledge of oral and written language through a supportive environment where positive attitudes toward reading are fostered. The curriculum, which is based upon the child's natural curiosity to make sense of the world, is designed to provide as many varied opportunities as possible to interact with the language environment. Appropriate literacy experiences provide for all developmental levels ranging from children with little interest in books to those who are reading.

The classroom provides a language and print rich environment through a variety of literacy experiences including individual, small group, and large group situations with opportunities for informal and spontaneous verbal interaction among children and adults. Since the child's own language is seen as an important source for reading material, exposure to the written word is provided through dictated stories about children's experiences and child-made books.

Classroom experiences are available which assist children in seeing the meaning of written language and which integrate reading and writing into the total curriculum. Experiences include the use of records and tapes to encourage listening to music, stories, and poetry; use of flannel boards and puppets to encourage story telling; use of classroom charts and graphs that encourage problem solving; as well as opportunities for dramatic play, painting, drawing, and creative construction with the use of manipulative materials.

The kindergarten teacher actively models the joy of reading through daily reading of stories to children. Teachers organize a rich environment in the classroom and provide many experiences for oral language, silent reading, and written work where errors are seen as part of the child's natural patterns of growth and development. Emerging literacy is an integral part of the daily experience of kindergarten children. This foundation helps children build confidence and a feeling of success as they explore oral and written language.

Math-Science

Young children learn math by a process of "doing and re-doing." Counting pennies, counting apples, grouping cars and

shells, setting the table with enough plates for the number of people who are going to eat, making graphs, and deciding how many saucers you need for so many cups are all experiences which will help children understand what numerical symbols represent and show them how numbers are used. Children need to touch, to feel, and to manipulate concrete objects in ways which will help them grow in their understanding of math from the "inside out," as opposed to workbooks and worksheets which are frequently too abstract for young children. These experiences allow children to construct and internalize the understanding of the mathematical concepts they will need for future learning.

Like math, the approach to teaching science in kindergarten is dependent on the active involvement of the children. By observing, experimenting, questioning, and exploring, they discover answers to their own questions as well as those posed by adults. Spontaneous experiences alone, however, cannot provide a complete science curriculum. The teacher must plan a program to cover a range of topics which relate to the children's life experiences and occur in a sequence which allows for growth and development. To fully absorb ideas in science, children need repetition, which instills in them the confidence to continue their learning and exploration. By accepting the children's ideas and challenging them with new ones, the teacher moves them on to more complex thinking. Children are by nature scientists. They are propelled by their curiosity and the need to discover. The role of the teacher is to support, encourage, and share in the joy and delight that comes from children's discoveries.

Social Studies-Health

The focus of the social studies curriculum is the child's place in the scheme of the world. Increasing awareness of socialization and the functions of people in a community are goals consistent with kindergarten children's development. The health curriculum also is a natural outgrowth of children's needs. Good health habits and safety are two concerns that are addressed by child-centered learning experiences. Appropriate learning experiences include field trips, films, printed materials, role-playing, class discussions, experience charts, and classroom visitors.

Art

Art in the kindergarten is creative and open-ended. It is not craft projects that consist of parts prepared by the teacher to produce a predetermined product. Through a variety of materials, children's self expression, feelings of success, and accompanying self worth are enhanced. Children need experiences that emphasize not an outcome, but the process of creativity and spontaneity. The children need the freedom to create and to express their own experiences, as well as the opportunity to participate in activities related to other curricular areas.

Music

Music is one of the most enjoyable activities of the kindergarten day and can be used to enrich other aspects of the curriculum. The use of music benefits children by promoting creativity and self-esteem in conjunction with learning about music for its own inherent value. Participation in musical activities helps children cope with shyness, anger, frustration, inhibitions, and tensions. Use of the piano, record player, instruments, tape recorders, songs, chants, and records enhances memory, teaches discrimination, listening, and rhythm.

Physical Education

Physical education programs develop eye-hand coordination, large and small-muscle strength and control, balance, coordination, health, growth, body image, and good posture. In addition, physical education gives children the opportunity to release abundant energy. Activities take the form of group games, imitative games, and free play in a non-competitive, enjoyable atmosphere. A variety of equipment including balance beams, balls, bean bags, jump ropes, parachutes, scooter boards, tumbling mats, ring toss, and standard playground equipment are used to promote children's body awareness and physical well-being. This equipment is used indoors or out.

Class Size

Both research and child development theory support the need for greater individual teacher attention at this stage of development. Classroom learning is a factor of many variables including curriculum, teacher quality, and prior experiences of the child, facilities, materials, and instructional methods. Instructional methods is a key factor in classroom learning. Smaller class size facilitates the use of appropriate instructional methods such as small group and individual instruction. A review of research conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education indicates that while an overall optimum class size cannot be determined there is general agreement that class size needs to be less than 20 students in order for appropriate instructional methods to be effectively utilized.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

Since parents are the child's first teachers, the parent component is an integral part of the kindergarten program. The foundation of classroom teacher working cooperatively with parents is vital to a successful atmosphere. Kindergarten signifies to many parents the beginning of a more formal educational setting. The parent-school relationship begins early -- preferably at the time of registration. Contact during the year occurs in a variety of ways. Parent meetings, assistance in the classroom, conferences, home visits by teachers, newsletters, and classroom visits are just a few of the methods that are used. Parents help make their child's school experience more meaningful: thus educators communicate information relative to the kindergarten curriculum thoroughly and consistently to encourage a strong working relationship.

Placement and Enrollment

Kindergarten programs strive to be developmentally appropriate. They emphasize individualized programming as they plan to meet the needs of most children.

There are a few children who meet age requirements yet are not developmentally ready for a large group experience. When there is a question concerning a child's readiness to

absorb kindergarten level skills, parents need to be counseled and advised about the available options. Schools have an obligation to provide educational services for these children. Programs, sometimes known as Developmental Kindergartens, Junior Kindergartens, or Gift of Time, seek to promote skills, understandings, and the time necessary for a successful kindergarten experience the following year. Some parents may choose yet an additional option for their child -- that being to delay school entrance for a year. These options and services are designed to enhance self esteem and to lead to more successful school experiences.

To insure that children are properly placed in kindergarten, effective and comprehensive methods for evaluating readiness for kindergarten are needed. This evaluation is based on:

1. Developmental observations and recommendations from the child's previous teacher (applies to children with prior preschool or day care experience).

2. Results from carefully chosen developmental assessment(s).

Teachers and/or administrators are responsible for sharing the results from the assessments and the informal observations with the child's family. Whenever possible, representatives from the school confer with the parents to gain a better understanding of the child's development and to arrive at a mutually agreeable decision concerning the child's placement for the following year.

Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten: Bridging the Gap

Young children will be able to make a smooth transition from one level of learning to the next when day care, nursery school, private and public school educators join together to share information, address common concerns, and develop continuity between various programs. It is through ongoing and collaborative communication and a uniting of efforts and resources that young children will be enabled to move forward positively. The use of the Greater St. Louis Early Childhood Transfer Form provides information to children's new teachers about their experiences.

Conclusion

In summary, the Greater St. Louis Kindergarten Position Paper provides a broad overview of the kindergarten experience. It can serve as a useful tool for those involved in planning curriculum as well as those wanting a deeper understanding of five year old children and their kindergarten year. In view of the changes in kindergarten education, there is a need to communicate widely and to emphasize significant components of effective teaching. By doing so, we can give those involved with kindergarten education, whether they be educators, policy makers, or parents, a framework from which to build.

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